

Accountability

I write these lines while the Canada election campaign 2004 is in full swing. In times like that "accountability" is a word on wings, flying over the airwaves and resting on billboards. It is equally aired at the CA public hearings, also currently underway, and is featured in the CA "hymn-video", power-pointed at attendees at the CA public hearings. Manifestly then, "accountability" is of concern to the CA.

It seems we believe in political accountability because it has been successfully marketed to us. And because it is convenient to convince ourselves that politicians do not do to us so much objectionable governing as they do with total impunity. Consenting to haplessness is painful and if relief is a myth, so be it, we take it. Unfortunately acceptance of myth, good for the soul as it may be, is detrimental to progress.

What is political accountability?

Although not often delineated, it is commonly perceived as the option voters have to vote other than the incumbent political party, government, or candidate, if they do not like the performance of the incumbent. Ostensibly, come election time, the incumbent accounts for his/her/their behaviour to the voters and the voters reward him/her/them with re-election or punish him/her/them by not re-electing him/her/them. This accountability is touted as a pillar of our democracy.

Is this all there is to it? Is this something to write home about? No, for it is a myth. Indeed it is worse than that, for in reality there is less to it than even that.

If that is what accountability is all about and even if we are satisfied that it is sufficient, how could we punish a government or a party deserving punishment when that party's candidate in the riding happens to be a splendid chap or gal? What if the other candidates on the riding ballot are awful? Or vice versa, that is to say, what if the party fares well in the "accountability" test but the party candidate is bad, or otherwise despicable?

In such instances, not really rare, are voters not denied (de facto) their right to hold politicians accountable? Is such denial excusable in view of the central role accountability is supposed to play in the governance of our society? Is there no way to prevent its occurrence?

Let's look at another likely scenario. Suppose the incumbent candidate, or the party is, or are, deserving of punishment. Voters may deny him/her/them their vote, yet, but to make the process meaningful, they must vote for someone they dislike or a party they oppose. This is because the facility to vote for NOTA, (None Of The Above) is denied to us by politicians who fear for the system they feed on, who are determined to deny us the facility to say we dislike all of them, the facility to say move out of the way to let deserving people emerge on the political stage. Because of this denial of the NOTA voting facility, many people do not bother to visit the polling stations, risking being labeled "apathetic", if not "anti-democratic", by epithet hurlers. Yet, forced voting abstinence is akin to democratically neutering citizens.

Incidentally, to control the swelling of the "apathetic" citizens ranks, democratically-minded Australian politicians force voters to go to the polls, like it or not. There are zealots who would emulate it in Canada, but thus far they have been shy, fortunately methinks..

But let us for a moment dig ourselves deeper into myth. Let's assume that we can punish, as we see fit, governments, political parties and politicians, using the accountability system in force. So what? one may ask

What good is it if we are made to endure passively the suffering they cause us for the years between elections, all the while unable to stop them hurting us and tearing apart our societal home? Must we accept it as being "natural", or otherwise inevitable, that we remain without any means to hold the politicians accountable between elections? Must we resign to holding politicians accountable momentarily every four or five years? What can conceivably justify giving the politicians free reign to govern us badly as they may for such long periods as they may, without us having the democratic franchise to call them to account *then and there* when they hurt us?

Let us now take it to the next step. Let us pretend that we have the choice, that we may really do so. We may give or deny our X to politicians so as to hold them "accountable". What does this do to them, what does it do to us?

What are the consequences from denying re-election? The politician loses "his/her" seat, they say. But is the seat the politician's own? If so how did it come into his/her possession? The politician had nothing before "we the people" let the politician sit on that seat. The seat is

ours, it is not the politicians' and, therefore, asking a politicians to get off "our" seat, is not penalizing the politician. If anything, he/she/they owe us gratitude for letting him/her/them occupy that seat or seats for as long as he/she/they did. Then where is the accountability to be found in asking politicians to vacate "our", seats? Pray tell....

It is worse than that. We denied Ujjal Dosanjh re-election. Is this holding him accountable for suppressing the will of British Columbians, expressed 83% in favour of the 1991 Recall & Initiative Referendum? Let's see: To begin with, he gets a pension earned while labouring at suppressing our will. Then Paul Martin salvaged Ujjal Dosanjh from the political dustbin and recycled him as the Liberal Candidate in Vancouver South. Martin aficionados are tormented now on whether to hold Dosanjh accountable or express their affection for Martin. But even if he is not voted in, Dosanjh will end up in the public trough again, be it in the Senate or a plum appointment, as soon as Liberals are in a position to practice patronage again. Yet, because of his actions, we are without Recall and Initiative in British Columbia. Have we held Dosanjh accountable? Where is the accountability in the system?

An accountability system must serve as a deterrent to politicians every time they have to wrestle with temptation. Is the current system fulfilling this requirement? Unfortunately it does not. To begin with, to avert being held thus "accountable", for whatever it may be worth, politicians need not be good - they only need to be, or appear to be, better than their rivals. The realities this generates have prompted "the lesser evil" adage. Indeed many people, too many of us, too often for comfort, feel we must vote the lesser evil to shield ourselves from a worse fate. Such a belief, irrespective of it being well-founded or not, is toxic to the democratic governance of the society.

Evidently this is a patently inadequate system for holding politicians accountable. It is erratic and if that is what political accountability is all about, it is totally inadequate as manifested by the kind of politicians we get.

Whether we need any accountability system, any at all, embedded in our political system is arguable and, in a future article, I shall discuss the subject. However, to conclude the present discussion, let us assume that we must have an accountability subsystem incorporated into our political system.

Then we need determine whether the accountability facility is to be piggybacked on the Electoral subsystem, be attached to some other subsystem, or be a standalone sub-system within the political system. In any event, the CA must grapple with the problem. If it can be reasoned out that accountability is to be embedded into the Electoral System then the system must provide accordingly. If not, then the CA must explain to the society that the electoral system is not to punish, or reward politicians, it is to assemble the best parliament possible, at any given time.

One thing is certain, that if political accountability is essential or desirable, (please do not rush to judgment!), then we need a better system. Surely there is no purpose in fooling ourselves that the existing one is meaningful.

Tom Varzeliotis. Citizen.